

19 November 1960

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Some Estimates on the Immediate Situation in Laos

1. We believe that Souvanna intends to remain as Prime Minister in Vientiane and that he is not likely to resign as the result of diplomatic or domestic political pressures. Even if a quorum of the National Assembly were to convene in Luang Prabang and to pass a no confidence motion, and if the King subsequently were to name someone else to form a government, Souvanna would probably maintain that the deputies and the King, as prisoners of rebel forces, were acting under duress and that, therefore, their act was illegal and invalid. Souvanna would continue to claim to be the head of the legal government in Laos, and the legal situation would be confused in both domestic and foreign opinion. Any political measures to oust the Souvanna government are likely to be ineffective unless enforced by military means.

2. Diplomatic and domestic pressures to force Souvanna's resignation, and the erosion of his domestic non-Communist support, have forced him to a point where he now relies almost

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exclusively upon the support of the Pathet Lao and the Kong Le elements. We believe that this pattern will continue, and that as opposition to him mounts he will seek broader and more specific support from the Communist bloc. Souvanna probably still hopes to keep Communist influence in check, but some of his measures to protect his position by moving closer to the Communists will be irrevocable, and most, if not all, of them will be highly favorable to future Communist dominance of the Vientiane government.

3. For example, the pro-Phoumi coup of 10 November in Luang Prabang almost certainly precipitated the agreement between Souvanna's government and the Communist Neo Lao Hae Xat, announced on 17 November, to establish a national coalition government including representatives of the HLEH. The agreement also provides that the government would soon accept aid from Communist China and North Vietnam and would send a delegation to those countries to negotiate for exchange of economic and cultural relations, for the re-establishment of telecommunications with North Vietnam, and for the immediate opening of the Laos-China border.

4. Souvanna has already requested that the US cease sending military supplies to Luang Prabang, and he will probably soon make

a similar request with respect to Savannakhet. It is highly likely that Souvanna, especially if his military position further worsens, will appeal to the UN against alleged US intervention in Laos' internal affairs.

5. If the Savannakhet and Luang Prabang forces attempt to take Vientiane by force in order to oust Souvanna, they will probably have to contend with a combined Pathet Lao-Hong Le defense of the city and with Pathet Lao counter attacks in the Luang Prabang and the Thakhet-Savannakhet-Pakee areas. In short, the situation will turn into widespread civil war and probably further fragment the non-Communist factions.

6. In these circumstances the anti-Pathet Lao forces might be able to hold certain towns, especially in the south, but we do not believe these forces would win out, perhaps not even if they received extensive outside assistance. If such foreign assistance included troops there would be grave risk that it would lead to the introduction of "volunteers" from North Vietnam into the picture.

7. In short, the situation is becoming more polarized than it has been, countrywide civil war seems imminent, and the

outcome doubtful. Unless Souvanna can soon be brought to resign or the Kong Le-Pathet Lao forces in and around Vientiane quickly overcome, we believe that the US may soon be faced with the following alternatives: (a) to accept Souvanna's solution, with serious risk of ultimate Pathet Lao supremacy -- a course involving serious adverse effects on government attitudes in Southeast Asia; or (b) to intervene militarily in an attempt to guarantee non-Communist footholds in Laos -- with risks of expanded hostilities and of little international support on this issue.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

ARMAN KENT
Chairman